



Sortino, D. P. (2017). *A guide to how your child learns: Understanding the brain from infancy to young adulthood*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

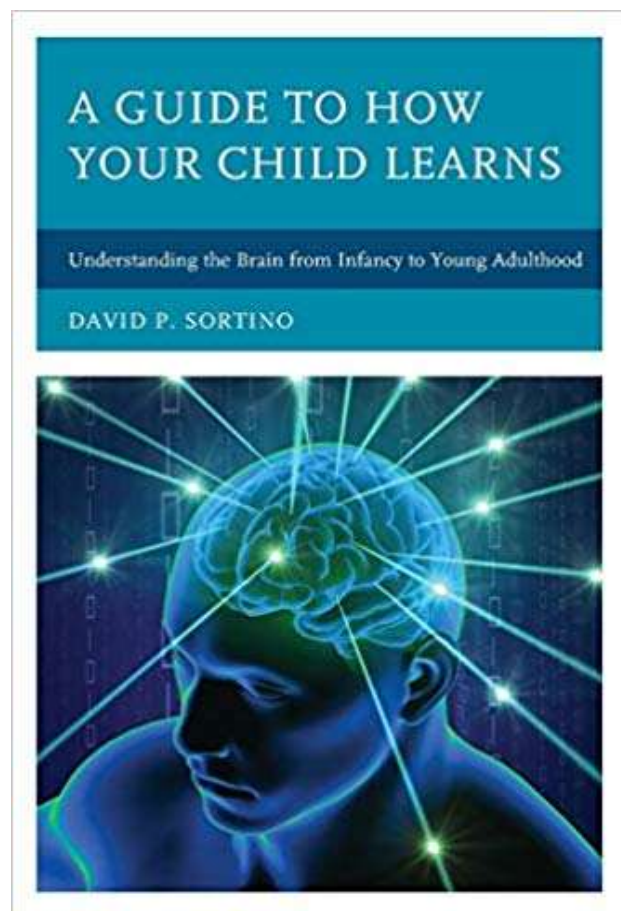
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In the first of three books in his Brain Smart series, David P. Sortino emphasizes the importance of honoring “miraculous differences in abilities and learning styles” (p. xvii). He illustrates his point with an example of a fifth grade science teacher who brought a live bat to school in order to teach a lesson on species. Introducing a live mammal instead of instructing students to group animals based on their similarities on paper, the teacher stimulated students’ limbic system (hippocampus), which resulted in a higher level of cognition for students in her class. This example captures the essence of *A Guide to How Your Child Learns: Understanding from Infancy to Young Adulthood*, an informative text based on experience and scholarship that will deepen the knowledge of both parents and teachers to impact more effectively the lives of children.

Throughout his book, Sortino refutes and supports claims made by other researchers who may or may not have his background and experience. Having earned a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, the author has worked as a



learning specialist for nearly 40 years, and currently directs The Neurofeedback Institute. He begins by discussing the developmental stages of children ages 2-6. He recommends placing children in preschool programs that support artistic self-expression, and reinforcing this in the home as well, to establish “a positive learning experience that can lead to higher order learning” (p. 2). This recommendation is largely based on Jean Piaget’s first two developmental stages, the sensorimotor stage (0-2 years old) and the preoperational stage (2-7 years old). After young children develop a concept of object permanence (sensorimotor), they begin to use symbolic thinking (preoperational), wherein they reach an understanding of concepts and symbols and are able to engage in storytelling themselves. While Sortino’s overview of human development in the arts is not as authoritative as titles such as *Artistic Development* (Milbrath, McPherson, & Osborne, 2015), his treatment of the subject is both informative and practical.

The human brain grows substantially in early childhood, and Sortino emphasizes that it is crucial that caregivers understand the importance of proper nutrition and early stimulation (such as touching, bonding, and the like) at this stage. Head Start has been shown to have a positive effect on a child’s growing brain, leading to the development of pre-reading, pre-writing, and vocabulary skills. Research shows that children who attend this type of programming, combined with parents reading to them often, have larger vocabularies and better social and emotional development than children in comparable control groups. Sortino also stresses the connection between quality early childhood education and low high school dropout rates and a reduction in juvenile offenders, drawing from the work of researchers from Harvard, New York University, the University of California, the University of Washington, and the University of Wisconsin.

Other interesting topics in this volume include cultural differences, brain differences between males and females, delayed gratification and school success, and negative effects of IQ tests on young children and their academic success or lack thereof. Sortino highlights the importance of allowing children to engage in fantasies before they begin to experience challenges and failures in life; the effect of “Sesame Street” on working memory and language development; and the negative effects that overprotective parenting can cause for children’s brain development.

A significant portion of the text is devoted to informing readers how they can assist young people with developmental delays and disorders. The author gives good advice to parents who are concerned about delays in their child’s printing or drawing skills. For example, little fingers need thick pencils; purchase pencil grips and large lined paper; hand exercises such as squeezing a rubber ball can increase dexterity. Sortino’s claims are supported by research, which has shown that without early intervention in the habits of young children with delayed printing and writing skills, future language arts skills such as reading can be seriously affected (Johanson & Arthur, 2016).

Although they are short, every article in *A Guide to How Your Child Learns* contains guidance for parents and teachers that is evidence-based and effective. For example, ADHD is the focus of several portions of the text on childhood learning from early childhood to the adulthood. The author also discusses findings from a study conducted by the Center for Disease Control regarding the effects of medication such as Ritalin on the behavior of young children. He disagrees with the results of this study and with the CDC’s recommendation to medicate children when problems arise. As Sortino explains, neurofeedback (a brain training program) is the number one alternative to medication for children with ADHD, not behavior therapy.

Strategies are discussed to increase reading fluency, such as *Rehearsal* (the reading of high frequency words such as those in the *Dolce Reading List*, done by parent and child together), *Pre-reading* (predictions of plot and words used by author, based simply on a book's title), *Echo Reading* (a highly successful reading strategy wherein students repeat after a teacher while the teacher reads aloud); and the *Read Aloud Program* (which calls for parents to read one story to the child three times per week in 20-minute intervals). This latter approach showed a 50% increase in participating children's voluntary reading time and interest. While Sortino cites some studies on this topic, other books offer more research-based information on assessment and instruction; see, for example, Jennings, Caldwell & Lerner, 2014 for a more exhaustive approach for learning to work with individuals with reading problems.

In addition to outlining strategies to help children with reading difficulties, Sortino also discusses how to effectively support young people with developmental delays, reactive attachment disorder (RAD), and depression or anxiety caused by school shootings. RAD mostly affects adoptive or abused children and is characterized by an inability of a child to bond with others. *Choral Reading* is an effective strategy to use with RAD students because it allows students to read along with their teachers, reinforcing the bonding process. Additionally, since many RAD students suffer academically as well as socially, teachers have more success in reaching these students through visual and kinesthetic lessons. Since these students are more often right-brained, Sortino notes that this strategy works well.

Two sections of the book are dedicated to the developmental stages of children from late childhood to late adolescence. In the section on children ages 7-10, Sortino focuses on reading fluency, puberty, stimulating pre-teens' learning and intelligence, the magic of

fantasy for children of this age, combating the summer slumps, the dangers of BPA (bisphenol A, an industrial chemical that has been used to make certain plastics and resins since the 1960s), the lost art of cursive writing, the abundance of false diagnoses of ADD and ADHD, and the effect of sex differences on learning in the classroom. In the section on ages 11-16, he focuses on the negative consequences for this age group, such as the lack of arts in schools, funding inadequacies in school budgets, the transition from elementary to middle school, absentee fathers and youth violence, high recidivism rates, and the effects of electronic gadgets on students' growing brains.

Throughout the book, the author emphasizes the differences in individual learning styles and stresses the importance of parents and teachers reaching children with different strengths. "Students who are verbally gifted could experience greater learning in lectures, while students who might learn best visually, their learning could be higher when watching movies or viewing a slide lecture, etc." (p. 19). Sortino's claim that parents and teachers need to learn strategies to improve student learning while maintaining awareness of how children with different strengths learn builds on earlier research. He refers to Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983) when claiming children learn best when we recognize their preferred intelligences. Regardless of a child's preferred intelligence or preferred learning style, parents and teachers can employ certain strategies to help students remember information that they have learned. *Chunking* or *grouping* information according to similarities is one strategy that has been found to be effective. *Deep processing*, wherein children relate the new material to themselves and their own lives, can also be effective. Other practical action plans may include active learning or having children verbally recite new information aloud. While Sortino's book provides an overview of these strategies, other works like Judy Dempsey's

Turning Education Inside-Out: Confessions of a Montessori Principal (2016) offer a more comprehensive list of ways to support learners at various ages.

A bibliography at the end of the book is a helpful addition, and further reading will most likely be necessary for most professionals in

education since his explanations are so brief. Sortino covers a wide range of topics in this slender volume, with each article consisting of two pages. While it may be lacking for education professionals, it can be a helpful guide for parents or others who seek basic information written in an easy-to-read style.

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